

Tracking students in secondary education : consequences for student performance and inequality

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Addendum: Valorization

A number of countries have changed the tracking regime for students in secondary education in the twentieth century (see also Chapter 6) and still every few years there are political and societal debates on the desirability of tracking students. This thesis discusses in the different chapters questions that are often leading in the political and societal debate on tracking: (1) Does tracking increase the average cognitive development? and (2) Does tracking increase inequality among students? This section discusses five policy recommendations following from this thesis which could aid in these debates, focusing on recommendations that do not require a complete overhaul of the education system.

- *To try to increase student performance in a highly tracked education system, society could decide to base track placement on prior performance. (Based on Chapter 3)*

Chapter 3 looks at whether the relation of tracking and student performance is different under different circumstances, namely when school principals consider prior performance when accepting students or not. It shows that tracking has a more positive relation with student performance if prior performance is taken into account. This suggests that using prior performance for track placement increases performance in a tracked system.

However, Chapter 3 does not present causal evidence saying that highly tracked education systems that introduce track placement based on prior performance achieve better results after the change, but the results can be interpreted as suggestive for such a causal inference. Further research is needed to confirm this recommendation.

- *If society wants to reduce the influence of parental background on student performance, one possible way to do this might be by using prior achievement to select students into tracks. (Based on Chapter 3)*

Students in highly tracked countries that are in schools where the principal considers prior performance when accepting the student experience a lower effect of parental background than students in a comprehensive system. This is intuitive since if students are accepted based on prior performance the track choice of the parents is only one of the factors involved. Or it could be that in those systems parental choice is not even taken into account at all. By making it mandatory for school principals to consider prior performance for track placement, the influence of parents might be reduced. However, as Chapter 3 does not present causal evidence this recommendation is based on suggestive evidence only and should also be interpreted that way.

- *Secondary school principals in the Netherlands should be more lenient in accepting the marginal student to the highest track. (Based on Chapter 4)*

Chapter 4 shows that in the Netherlands the marginal student on the threshold from going to the higher track (VWO) and the middle track (HAVO) performs better on a number of dimensions in the higher track, while it is not harmed on other dimensions, at least not on the dimensions looked at in this study. The students perform better on a reading and IQ test and they also have a more positive self-perceived probability to obtain the degree. No negative effects on other cognitive and non-cognitive skills were found. This means that there seem to be only benefits for going to the higher track for the marginal student. For the marginal student it would therefore be better if school principals are more lenient in accepting this student to the higher track.

However, students who are already in the higher track might suffer negative consequences from allowing one extra (low performing) student to the class. In the sample of Chapter 4 this would mean raising the median class size from 19 to 20 and shifting the mean ability level somewhat down. This peer effect is not looked at in Chapter 4 and thus no definite answer can be given here. On the other hand, given the literature on peer effects it is not unreasonable to assume that allowing one extra low performing student to the class has a low impact on the outcomes of the other students, especially if the mean class ability does not decrease much from such a change (Sacerdote, 2011).

- *If society wants to reduce the influence of parental background on track placement, not only the influence of parents on the child should be addressed but also the influence of the parents on the teacher of the child. (Based on Chapter 5)*

Chapter 5 investigates the influence of parents on the elementary exit test score and the elementary school teacher track recommendation in the Netherlands. I find that on both performance measures there is an influence of parents over and above the general influence they have on their child's ability, although only the influence on the recommendation seems to be very robust. The results suggest that either teachers are influenced by parents to provide a different recommendation than justified by the performance of the child, or teachers might (unconsciously) make different considerations for children with specific parental characteristics. The results in Chapter 5 show that parents have an influence on track placement through two channels: through their influence on their child's ability and through an additional influence on the teacher recommendation. If parental influence is deemed undesirable, it is important to not only counteract parental influence on the ability of their children but also the additional parental influence on the teacher.

In a broader context, the results from Chapter 5 can be seen as only one example of a study into the influence of parental characteristics on teachers. There is also indication

that teachers behave differently towards children of different parental backgrounds and their parents by, for instance, lowering expectations (Jussim *et al.*, 1996) or by providing a specific environment most suitable for specific groups of parents (Lareau, 1987). If parental influence is deemed undesirable by society then also these routes of parental influence should be addressed.

- *Test scores for young students should be corrected for their relative age when one wants to compare results across students. (Based on Chapter 6)*

Chapter 6 looks at the effect of early tracking and relative age on short and long term outcomes. The results show that relatively young students are more likely to go to the lower track and more so in countries that track early. The reasoning for this is that, as captured in the relative age effect, relatively young have lower student performance than relatively old students in the early school years. When early on students are selected into tracks based on this student performance and no correction for age in month is made, relatively young students have lower scores than relatively old students, are thus more often deemed to be the weaker students, and thus more likely to be placed in the lower track.

Chapter 6 looks only at the effect of relative age and early tracking on outcomes, but the relative age effect itself also has an effect on outcomes, for instance by lowering the chances of relatively young students to go to the higher track. However, also in earlier stages, day to day contact between educators and children, and in different fields, like the sport field, the relative age effect plays a role. Due to this performance difference (relatively young and old) children might not be challenged or supported as much as they need to excel. To prevent this and to be able to accurately compare or rank the performance of students, performance needs to be corrected for relative age differences.

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